

May 8, 2022

The Fourth Sunday in Easter

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Grace and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ, our Good Shepherd. Amen.

Sometimes, the more we hear or repeat something, the less we pause to think critically about it. Think about some of the things we say every week in worship, for example, like the Lord's Prayer or the Creeds. Many of us could probably recite them in our sleep. And this is not to suggest that we believe or trust what we say any less, but, I think that our routines can and do become just that — routine. We get used to them, and we don't have to think about them as much as time goes on. When we make coffee or brush our teeth, we just do it. We don't stop to think about every step or to reexamine why we continue to do that thing. We know that we need it.

This happens with Scripture, too. There are some passages that are so familiar to us and so beloved that we could probably recite them in our sleep. When we hear them or read them, we don't need to pause for even one second to think about them. We believe and trust those words; we know that we need them. But, as time goes on, the world changes and so too do we. Pausing to reexamine something in the light of a different context or experience, we make new meaning for ourselves. We are always trying to find ourselves — our stories and our communities' stories — within the wider context of God's story.

How many times have you heard, or read, or sung the 23rd Psalm? Many of you could probably recite it along with me in your homes:

"The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff — they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long."

This psalm comes up in our cycle of readings a few times every year. It is read sometimes in Lent, it shows up today, and it will appear again this fall. We often hear it at funerals or memorial services, especially at the graveside. But, do we always pause to think about it anew?

As I was thinking about today, which is often called Good Shepherd Sunday, I remembered an exercise involving Psalm 23 from my own confirmation class back in 2004 — I was 13 years old then, in 8th grade, and in my second of three years of

confirmation. We had been discussing how to read the Bible, and the topic we were covering one particular day was “Paraphrasing the Scripture to Unlock Its Meaning for Today.” To think about this, we worked with Psalm 23. I was able to find that piece of paper stuffed inside a packet in a box of materials under my bed, a few layers above a baptismal certificate and first Communion materials. After reading Psalm 23, my pastors at the time asked us to respond to a few questions: “What is at least one thing in your life that makes you afraid?” And, “How can your relationship with God help you face your fears with courage and hope?” We could ask ourselves these questions every week of our lives and probably come up with new answers. Even since we last read Psalm 23 together just a few weeks ago, so much has changed and continues to change in our world.

What I really loved about that day in confirmation class and what makes me remember it to this day, I think, is what Pastor Mike and Pastor Mary asked us to do next. They had us paraphrase and rewrite the Psalm, putting it into our own words to speak to our lives. First, we talked about how shepherding was a common occupation at the time. Naturally, it became a common Biblical image as well. In the tenth chapter of John, Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, God is referred to as the Shepherd of Israel. In the ancient world, kings were often depicted as shepherds. The pharaohs of Egypt were usually shown holding shepherds’ crooks and flails, showing how they led and guided their people. However, not many of us have a lot of experience with shepherds anymore. So that day in confirmation, we rewrote Psalm 23 to make some meaning of it for ourselves, to reimagine what God as one who shepherds, guides, and takes care of might look like for us.

The assignment said: “Rewrite Psalm 23 to reflect situations you face today. What would be a good modern term for God as one who takes care of us? What terms would describe the secure comfortable life God gives?” I don’t claim that this is any masterpiece but I present to you Psalm 23 written by a 13-year-old who spent most of his time in orchestra, band, and chorus:

The Lord is my electronic tuner, I shall not be off-key.

He comforts my fingers,
he soothes my sore throat,
he insures my hands.

He makes song requests
so he can listen to his favorite tunes.

Even though I broke a string,

I fear no replacement cost;

for you are with me:

your gift certificate to Zeswitz comforts me.
You turn my pages for me
in the middle of long songs;
you adjust my stand,
you tighten my bow.
Surely you will teach me scales
all the days of my life,
and I shall always have a paying gig
in the House of the Lord.

We all find ourselves in different contexts today than we were just a few years ago. COVID has changed so much about our lives and work. Some of you who are teachers or administrators now find yourselves trying to teach your students in new and creative ways. Some of you might be trying to do your job in a way you were never prepared to do, and some of you might be without a job that you loved. During this time, there is plenty to be afraid of. But in God and in these words of Scripture, we also find hope and courage to face these times. This is as good a time as ever, I think, to pause and think about what these familiar words from Psalm 23 might mean in each of our lives. What does it mean for you that God is one who shepherds, leads, and provides for us?

If you have some time today or as you go through the week, try paraphrasing Psalm 23 for your life right now. What does it mean for you that God is our shepherd? Think about those two preliminary questions Pastor Mike and Pastor Mary asked: "What is at least one thing in your life that makes you afraid?" And, "How can your relationship with God help you face your fears with courage and hope?" Then, rewrite Psalm 23 to make meaning of it for your life today. What image might work for you to connect with our God who shepherds us through life? If you don't like writing or journaling, you could write a song, or draw or paint a picture.

One of the greatest comforts of Scripture is that we can step back and see the long arc of the story of God caring for God's people — from Abraham through the Exodus, from the words of Psalm 23 through the healings and teachings of Jesus, we see God who is the Good Shepherd. But the story of God shepherding God's people doesn't end with books of the Bible written a few thousand years ago — it continues right up to and through this very moment in each of your stories. God's people have walked through every kind of situation imaginable before, and God will shepherd you through all the days of your life, too.

Thanks be to God.